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# Viewpoints: Dialogue in India

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present study is the introduction of Paul Devanandan into its survey of Protestant approaches to religious pluralism. Again, the basic context is one which has been described often—the Tambaram debate and its aftermath, whose influence continues into the present. However, to Thomas' credit, other elements from the Protestant tradition are noted, especially the dominance of secularism and its manifestation in the tradition in the thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Arend van Leeuwen. At least in part as a reaction to the confrontational oppositions of Christianity to other religions (Barth/Kraemer) and of secular Christianity to all religion (van Leeuwen) there emerged another approach primarily among the churches and interchurch councils of Asia. This was a theology of Christian partnership with other religions and secular ideologies involved in the struggle for new life for people. The contribution of Stanley Samartha to this emergent theology is rightly noted, as is that of C.S. Song, and the various deliberations related to the work of the East Asia Christian Conference.

The concluding portion of the book considers the contribution of Paul Devanandan to the continuing 'common quest for a new humanism'. Certainly, as Thomas argues, the significance of Devanandan for Christian ecumenism is in his insistence on and stimulation of interfaith dialogue as an ongoing concern of the church in the common search for human community. Basically, Devanandan is convinced that in the new awareness of 'person,' 'history,' and 'community' all faith comes into a common circle of theological-anthropological concern and into the orbit of the process of a common human history. This requires an acknowledgement of "our common humanity" as well as "a secular framework" within which people of all religious traditions and of no religion can struggle together to enrich the common life of the human race. These confront all people with the twin tasks of "redemming all religions from the other-worldly preoccupation of pietism on the one hand and self-centered introversion or communalism on the other". In all of this Devanandan challenges every faith to

clarify its perspective on the common humanity, the secularity which expresses it, and the place and function of religion and religions in the process of building human community. To this dialogue the Christian faith brings the gospel of the common life, of the possibility of deliverance from bondage to forms of evil that are of human creation. In the creation of this common contemporary history, the gospel of the New Humanity in Jesus, the Christ plays an essential role. Hence, all faiths, including Christianity, are compelled to open themselves—or close themselves more firmly—to one another and to Jesus, the Christ in a new way.

Basically, both Panikkar and Devanandan urge us beyond the opposition of Christianity to other religions and ideologies to recognize Christian faith as the sign of the kingdom and the fermenting leaven in the universe of faith, bringing to all humanity the transforming knowledge of the universal presence of the Christ, the mediator of human and cosmic salvation. In this process both men outline major features not only of the Christ who is more than the Jesus of Nazareth, but also of a people of Christ in world history which is more than the historical community of those who openly acknowledge Jesus as God and Saviour. True, Panikkar's "unknown Christ" of traditional faiths and Devanandan's "acknowledged Christ" of nascent faiths may have to be redefined, but both indicate a reality which demands a new understanding of the church of Jesus, the Christ in relation to a wider people of Christ.

If, as Thomas concludes, the New Humanity in Christ is to transcend Christianity, other religions, and atheistic ideologies, it must transform them all from within. Then this New Humanity will be able to take new and diverse forms in them all. Thus, the truly ecumenical ecumenism, which is really unity in the Christ has to be understood as resulting from inner reform and must accommodate diversity. Perhaps this is what it means to risk Christ for Christ's sake.

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## Recent Publications

### BOOKS

Helen Ralston, *Christian Ashrams: A New Religious Movement in Contemporary India*. Lewiston NY and Queenston, Ontario: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1987. This book focuses on the emergence and development of Christian ashrams as a religious movement which seeks to amalgamate traditional Hinduism and traditional Christianity in contemporary Indian Society. The study is based on visits to twenty Hindu ashrams and thirty-one Christian ashrams in India.

*Modern Indian Responses to Religious Pluralism*, edited by Harold Coward. Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 1987, 340pp, \$14.95 pb., \$44.50 hc. This book studies the way in which religions living in India have responded to the encounter with one another. Part I examines various responses from within Hinduism. Part II analyzes the responses from other religions in India, including Christianity.

### ARTICLES

Helen Ralston, "Models of 'Church': A Cross-cultural Perspective." *Journal of Comparative Sociology and Religion*, 12, 1985, 9-37.

Helen Ralston, "Ashrams, Christian Indians and Nationalism." *Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism*, 15, 2, 1988.

### VIEWPOINTS

#### Dialogue in India

If publications and dialogue meetings are of any indication, then the dialogue initiative has come to stay in India. During the last two decades this initiative has grown among Hindus and Christians, though it is difficult to give the exact percentage of Indians who are affected by the dialogue movement. In the name of dialogue various centres are opened by the Christian communities and well-informed Hindus participating in inter-religious seminars and prayer meetings are in the increase. They find that more of 'living-together' for a few days rather than formal

discussions and seminars brings about a better result, creating fellowship among participants of different religions. This mode of dialogue is gaining ground among many dialogue groups that have been meeting for a number of years.

On the part of the Christians in India, dialogue with Hindus has had a different phase of growth. Dialogue began as a process of inculturation and Ashram movements where an openness towards and appreciation for Hindu religious texts and symbols created an enthusiastic climate among many. In 1970s, this process was at its height and adapting names and symbols of Hindu tradition had its own impact, though there was also opposition from some sections of the Christian community in India. Today a discerning person would evaluate such a phase of inter-religious 'dialogue' as no dialogue at all. Though one perceives an apparent openness to another religion in this venture, on further consideration one discovers that a superficial incorporation of elements of another religion into one's own is a lack of dialogue. An exposure to the supermarket of religious beliefs and practices does not necessarily broaden one's religious perspective but through confusion narrows down the scope of dialogue.

However this particular phase of dialogue has enabled some in 1980s to focus their attention into their own theological framework. The motives of dialogue are not always clear. One can pick up a wide range of motives among different dialogue partners depending upon their theological vision to engage in dialogue.

Attempts have been made already to articulate the pre-requisites of dialogue. For instance Paulose Mar Gregorios lists ten principles to be kept in mind while engaged in dialogue with other religions. ("Dialogue with world Religions. Basic Approaches and Practical Experiences". *Indian Journal of Theology* 1980, vol. 29, pp. 1-11). Leonard Swidler gives ten commandments concerning attitudes necessary for partners in dialogue ("The Dialogue Decalogue: Ground Rules for Inter-religious Dialogue" *Journal of Dharma* vol. 8. (1983) pp. 311-315). Such formulations envisage a phase of growth in which the dialogue partners are brought

face-to-face with the as-yet-unknown-dimension of reality and the possibility of change has been introduced. This change is the result of dialogue, for in a genuine dialogue one cannot remain unaffected if there is any involvement at all in this process. Secondly, by one's readiness to participate in a dialogue situation a certain acceptance of another's position and also certain validity is granted. Otherwise, there will be no dialogue or discussion taking place.

Given these presuppositions some of the writings on dialogue by Christian theologians do not clarify their stand with regard to certain issues like Evangelisation versus dialogue. Some hold that Proclamation of the Kingdom and dialogue are complementary. Others assert that dialogue does not mean the abandonment of Evangelism. It still appears that dialogue is a preparation for proselytisation. When a commission on dialogue and a commission on direct evangelisation are set up by the same organisation side by side and sometimes the same participants move in and out of these commissions one begins to wonder about the consistency of their theological vision and raise doubts about the motives of such a dialogue initiative.

In India, dialogue takes place also in another form with different headings such as national integration, secularism and so on because of the Indian situation. The secular state, understood as favouring no one particular religion but treating all religions equally, presupposes that its citizens respect the others' convictions and freedom to practise their religions. When India needs collaboration from all to build up a national community, one has to uphold common values that can sustain pluralism. One cannot talk in terms of co-existence, but needs a philosophy of pre-existence, living for the other. That is why inter-religious forums take up issues of communal harmony, human solidarity, national integration, and so on. The news-bulletin of such centres and associations do highlight values such as justice, harmony, equality, personal dignity and so on as common to all. Their praxis-oriented programmes of action and study play a vital role in promoting genuine dialogue among different religious groups.

Given the composition of the Indian

Society with differences in religion, language and community affiliation, dialogue becomes a necessity and by and large the well-meaning people do perceive it especially in the context of communal riots, minority-majority equations, demand for recognition as different ethnic groups and so on. Dialogue is usually associated with religions or at least with a religious attitude. Even when dialogue takes place at the socio-cultural forums, the theological perspective of this concept cannot be undermined, for dialogue should after all stem from a faith-horizon and a theological vision. That is why a survey of Hindu-Christian dialogue places the emphasis on what is going on between major religious communities.

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#### Dialogue in the Modern West

"Mankind's religious future may be obscure; yet one thing is certain: The living higher religions are going to influence each other more than ever before."

Arnold Toynbe

The Calgary Conference on Hindu-Christian Dialogue in September 1987, at which the idea of this bulletin was conceived, brought people together who came from places as distant as Hong Kong and Madras, Hamilton and Winnipeg, Kansas City and New York, Tokyo and Santiniketan, Waterloo and Geneva, Edmonton and Regina. Most of the participants had met before somewhere else—very often in places very far from Calgary. All the Easterners present had lived for extended periods in the west, all the Westerners had been to the East—some for many years. While the participants of this meeting may not have been typical for just any group of people meeting in conference at Calgary, they did typically represent the kind of cosmopolitanism connected with gatherings on interreligious dialogue. The conference topic "Hindu-Christian Dialogue" assigned roles to some as "Christians" and to others as "Hindus". But all those present were aware that these were fairly artificial boundaries. "Hindu-Christian Dialogue" is part of a wider interreligious dialogue which again is